

COUNCIL MEETING

23rd SEPTEMBER 2013

ORAL QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Simon Fawthrop of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

How many votes were cast on behalf of Bromley Council in the Orpington BID vote?

Reply:

There were 7.

Supplementary Question:

Given the narrowness of the vote overall, and the concerns of shopkeepers, particularly Petts Wood and Knoll, who voted predominantly against the BID what is the Portfolio Holder going to do to engage with those shopkeepers and overcome their concerns. That vote, if it had not been cast by the Council, would have meant that overall the BID would have been lost.

Reply:

I will put that right. There were 346 ballots papers issued and 165 received, 88 voted in favour and 76 against; even if the Council had not cast its votes the ballot would still have been won, both in terms of votes and rateable value. As regards putting people's minds at rest, I am hoping that the BID company, Orpington First, will engage with every trader, every business within the area and already it looks as if the BID is going to be very successful so I'm hoping that the people who in the early days thought it was a bad idea will in future think it is a very good idea.

2. From Councillor John Ince of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

In thanking and congratulating the Portfolio Holder for the provision of a working CCTV operation at the Cotmandene Crescent car park, could I ask him how many fly-tippers have been caught on camera and how many have resulted in successful prosecutions, since it commenced its operation.

Reply:

I would like to thank Cllr Ince for his question and kind comments therein. As Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety I was very happy to respond to the requests of the ward members for the installation of CCTV at Cotmandene. It was quite clear that despite the efforts of the ward councillors, who had made huge efforts in trying to deal with the issues there, and the support from my colleague the Portfolio Holder for the Environment, further action was clearly required. This I undertook with the installation of CCTV to deal with the anti-social behaviour and fly-tipping that was clearly occurring in this area. I'm glad to say this has been a huge success.

Currently, there are 158 recorded cases of fly-tipping at this site ranging from one bag to car loads and these run from 30th May until now. I myself have been to the CCTV control room and have seen literally car loads being dumped. So far, none have gone to court but it is anticipated that a number of the worst offenders will be prosecuted with some offenders having already attended interviews with Council officers at the Civic Centre. It has been decided that instead of prosecution each will be billed for clearance (depending on the amount deposited) and issued with a formal caution. This will result in London Borough of Bromley getting the money that would have otherwise been paid to the court.

There have been 29 Fixed Penalty Notices issued to date and 21 have been paid. As yet we haven't had any completed prosecutions but have 22 potential cases for people who have not replied to legal notices asking them to declare who was driving awaiting possible prosecution with a further five for fly-tipping. With regards to formal cautions we have commenced and completed 8 cases with estimated costs to be recovered and 4 people have fly-tipped twice since we started this action. Request for costs will be sent out shortly and we are looking to receive £150 to £200 per case. We have also sent out 28 warning letters for other forms of enforcement of other matters that we have come across while working with the CCTV cameras down there.

Supplementary Question:

I thank the Portfolio Holder for his response, it is nice to see it is working so well down there, although there are one or two lapses. Will the Portfolio Holder give us an assurance that when people are prosecuted that the maximum publicity can be given when people are successfully prosecuted, pour encourage les autres.

Reply:

Yes, I can reassure the ward councillors for Cray Valley West that we will be looking to get the maximum coverage out of our CCTV coverage. Last week Susie Clark our press officer sent out some coverage to the Newshopper announcing the installation of a CCTV camera there. She has promised that as soon as we get any prosecutions we will make absolutely certain that it is put out far and wide to get that message out that we are not going to tolerate that sort of behaviour down there any more. Trust me some of the behaviour has been absolutely staggering but we are sending out that message, people are getting that message, slowly things are improving, but the CCTV camera will do its job and has done its job. Yes, you'll get maximum coverage.

3. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett of the Leader of the Council

Following the statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the House of Commons on 26th June 2013 what is the estimated further saving the Council is required to make in each of the financial years 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18 and what has the total reduction in expenditure already made in the past three financial years?

Reply:

Since the 2010 Spending Review there have been further grant reductions, compared with original indications and the most recent in the Spending Round statement on 26 June this year.

The overall impact of the changes in Government funding, including the Coalition reaffirming the protection of health and education, which provides a higher proportion of cuts in local government are further savings of £2.1m per annum in 2014/15, £6.6m in 2015/16, 11m in 2016/17 and £19m by 2017/18. These figures identified are the cumulative savings required, but the annual change between years would be £2.1m in 2014/15, £4.5m in 2015/16, £4.4m in 2016/17 and a further £8m in 2017/18.

I should warn that these numbers should be treated with some caution as they reflect, for example, an estimate in the changes at a national level of the Government Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits, the degree of protection remaining for other public services, the method of allocating grant reductions, reductions to meet alternative grant funding and any other top-slicing that the government chooses to do between now and then.

Supplementary Question:

Could he tell us how much has been saved already, what the percentage has been, what the percentage has been on the figures we have still got to save and what the overall percentage is likely to be for the years 2010 to 2017.

Reply:

These are helpful questions at a time when we are entering into consultation with the public. £57m has been saved in the last 3 years which equates to approximately 29% of the 2010/11 net budget requirement of £197m. Further savings of over £60m will be required over the next four years on a budget base of £209m. This is a further 29% reduction. This equates to a total saving over the seven year period of approximately 58%.

4. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services

How many people who are homeless have been refused access to be able to register for Homeseekers this year?

Reply:

The legislation around housing allocations is very prescriptive and clearly sets out that homeless households must usually be given reasonable preference within any allocations scheme. Our scheme complies with this, meaning that homeless families would not normally be refused access to our housing register and Bromley Homeseekers.

However, our scheme does include a local connection criterion and an applicant who may be homeless but does not have either a local connection or an exceptional reason (as prescribed in the policy) for applying to Bromley, could be excluded.

The policy also excludes applicants with certain circumstances such as a high income level. In these circumstances though, the Department will still offer help in assisting them to secure an alternative accommodation/housing option.

It difficult to report on individual combinations of reasons for exclusion, however I can confirm that the Department have not excluded any statutory homeless applicants in the last 12 months – those applicants who have not been included on the Register have been those where officers have helped to resolve their homelessness issues.

Supplementary Question:

It would have been useful for Councillor Evans to answer the question. I asked him how many people who are homeless have been refused access to register for homelessness this year, and I did not see any answer there. The question Cllr Evans really needs to answer is, what is he doing to address the homelessness crisis affecting many residents in this borough. Thanks to the gate-keeping of this authority, many people are in desperate need of help, including a case I had recently where someone actually gave up his flat because he could not afford it in the private sector and he is now living in his van.

Reply:

The point that I made was that the Council have not excluded any statutory homeless person who has a local connection with Bromley from their registers. I think Councillor Fookes is suggesting that we offer assistance to people from well outside the Borough. I strongly believe that there must be a local connection or exceptional reasons. The Housing Department is working very hard under very difficult circumstances to ensure that the residents of Bromley are being well looked after.

5. From Councillor Tony Owen of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services

Are you satisfied that our housing partners adopt a sensible pragmatic approach to the changing needs of tenants?

Reply:

Housing associations are independent bodies that have their own set of policies for managing tenancies and responding to the needs of their tenants. However, we do work closely with the associations operating in the borough to encourage the adoption of good practice models and a consistent approach to tenants. The Bromley Federation of Housing Associations coordinates the sharing of information and the setting up of discussions on specific topics.

In general terms the associations in Bromley are aware of their client's problems and engage in seeking to address the changing circumstances of their tenants, particularly in terms of the changes around welfare reform, education, employment and advice to sustain tenancies.

In terms of changing needs requiring potential move-ons to alternative housing, the associations in the Borough all provide advice about housing options including mutual exchanges and other housing moves. All associations work

through Bromley Homeseekers and the Housing register, but they also generally manage emergency transfers through their own stock.

Supplementary Question:

Will the Portfolio Holder use his and the Council's influence to assist one of my tenants who has been told by Hyde Housing that it was regrettable that since they had been affected by the welfare reform (bedroom tax) their current tenancy could only be reviewed at the end of the three year period which would be in December 2015. Apparently my constituent has the wrong kind of tenancy with Hyde Housing and they have produced this bunkum rather than assist one of their own tenants. The result is likely to be homelessness and more illness. Will the Portfolio Holder do his utmost to assist with this case?

Reply:

I and the officers in the Housing Department are very willing to listen to particular problems from residents and in this particular case I will be happy to talk to Cllr Owen about his resident.

6. From Councillor Simon Fawthrop of the Chairman of General Purposes and Licensing Committee.

Can the Chairman confirm that the Council's policy in relation to licensing street furniture is that new licenses cannot be issued without the consent of Ward Members. Can he confirm this was the decision of General Purposes and Licensing Committee and correctly minuted?

Reply:

Councillor Fawthrop's question refers to an item at General Purposes and Licensing Committee on 10th April 2013, "Review of Licensed Street Trading." In particular we were looking at 23 temporary pitches which were to be made permanent. The minute reads -

"In response to questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that these street trading issues were non-executive matters.

RESOLVED that, in principle, the following be approved:

(a) Amendments to locations and goods where street trading be permitted, as set out in Appendix A, to take effect from 1st October 2013, in consultation with Ward Councillors and subject to formal consultation being undertaken and a further report being submitted thereafter."

I can confirm that this minute was found to be true and accurate at the following meeting of the Committee.

Supplementary Question:

Can the Chairman confirm whether Petts Wood and Knoll Ward Members were consulted on the receipt of applications at Station Square, Petts Wood.

Reply:

We did receive an email telling us that several premises had accepted an offer of a licence, It was rather a surprise to us that they had been offered before we had been consulted, but we were consulted at that point.

Additional Supplementary Question from Councillor Douglas Auld:

May I ask if he has any knowledge of who takes responsibility for granting the temporary licenses that were granted at the end of august?

Reply:

At our annual Council meeting we deal with a lot of delegations – on page 42 of that large document it says -

“To grant unopposed applications for full and temporary licenses and applications for renewals of such licences where the terms and conditions are unchanged.”

That is delegated to the Director of Environment and Community Services.

7. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

- i. If he will list the factors used to calculate the hourly cost of an officer in the Licensing team;
- ii. What are the money sums of each of the above?

Reply -

Factors included in calculation of hourly rates are as follows:-

Annual salary plus oncosts for NI and superannuation
HR and payroll costs
Travel expenses
Admin buildings and computer charges

The money sums are:-

Admin staff per fte	£24,517
Licensing officer per fte	£45,213
Admin building/computer costs per fte	£3,675
HR/Payroll costs per fte	£805
Travel expenses etc	£2,967

This is a complex matter and really needs to be decided corporately rather than by an individual department. I'm sure that the Chief Executive will be looking to deal with this matter shortly.

Supplementary Question:

Does this include pension costs as well?

Reply:

Yes, it includes superannuation which is pension costs.

8. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

What processes are in place to enable the Council to respond to heavily used litter bins?

Reply:

The Council might increase the frequency of collection, possibly hood or introduce a larger bin or even withdraw a bin altogether for a period where it is being abused by person or persons unknown, subject to the individual circumstances of any particular bin.

Supplementary Question:

What impression do residents and visitors get when this borough regularly fails to empty bins in Crystal Palace Park, as has been happening recently, especially in the warmer weather?

Reply:

Councillor Fookes will probably realise if he looks at the blogsite again that that so-called news is four months old. The Council's position in Crystal Palace Park is quite clear - it will empty the bins as often and as regularly as resources permit, as is exactly the case in every single park in the borough, without fear or favour. Any suggestion that this Council is in some way short-changing Crystal Palace will shortly be exposed to be the disingenuous falsehood that Members on this side of the chamber have long been telling Members opposite.

9. From Councillor Tony Owen of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

Can you explain why TfL removed the bus shelter outside Boots in Orpington High Street? Are you satisfied with the block paving that has replaced it?

Reply:

No I couldn't, until I asked, but TfL have advised the Council as follows:

The shelter in question is a part of TfL's landmark shelter upgrade programme. (which is great news for the burgers of Orpington who will soon be able to eat their paninis under shelter from inclement weather). However, a short hold up occurred when their contractors arrived on site and removed the old shelter they discovered some ducting that they had not anticipated which prevented them from resolving the job on the spot.

They will be back on 14th October to finish the job and remove the temporary groundwork that doesn't look as good as we would hope anywhere in the borough.

Supplementary Question:

It's more like a seascape non-shelter than a landmark shelter – I think they must have all been drunk when they put the cobbles back in. I know Councillor Smith is not responsible for TfL, but their communication is completely useless with this Council. Could I ask that Councillor Smith that he goes to TfL and express

the concern that people have when they don't know what's happening with things like this. They just disappear and they just stand in the rain or shelter in Boots.

If TfL could also decide where they are going to put the bus routes after the re-opening of the Chislehurst Road Bridge that would be helpful.

Reply:

Very happy to give that undertaking.

10. From Councillor Simon Fawthrop of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

Who authorised the licensing of street furniture at various premises in Station Square Petts Wood?

Reply:

The Director of Environment and Community Services has advised the three ward Members previously that due process has been followed in this instance and he stands behind the decision of the individual officer.

Supplementary Question:

Is the Portfolio Holder aware that there was a meeting between the ward Councillors for Petts Wood and Knoll and the Director of Environment and Community Services just after the annual Council meeting at which guarantees were given to the Members that no premises would be licensed without consulting ward Members first and is he disappointed like me that that agreement has not been kept.

Reply:

No, I am disappointed that the subject has been raised in the manner and tone that it has this evening, given the correspondence I have seen previously. We heard from Councillor Owen earlier that there is no cause not to give a temporary license unless there is real just cause. The temporary license will bring the three premises in question towards the end of October, when all the premises in question in that area of Petts Wood will be considered for licensing in consultation with the ward Members. That is very much the way it should be, in consultation with the ward Members, and you have my assurance that it will be.

11. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

If he will list all areas of the council's work which have been identified for 'channel shift' to digital communication, the potential savings in each case and the timetable for achieving the transfer?

Reply:

The key areas for channel shift to digital access are:

Registrars
Highways
Electoral

School Admissions including Free School Meals
Planning
Building Control
Property Helpdesk
Social Care
Parking
Streetscene & Greenspace including Waste Services
Environmental Health & Trading Standards
Council Tax & Benefits

We are expecting savings per annum in the order of £125-£200,000 for these service lines.

The decision by the Executive allows us to begin building a web portal to support this, pulling together those on-line options already in use such as fix my street, on-line admissions and parking. Additionally, it releases the necessary resource to formulate a clear strategy and project plan. This will include key milestones and defining reductions in service levels for traditional channels and/or closure in some elements, whilst also providing cost incentives for customers where a charge is made.

Supplementary Question:

Is he aware that in the pan London admissions process for school admissions, even if you register on-line as increasingly we encourage people to do, they get a letter by post in reply – does he agree with me that this is a nonsense when you can fly round the world without a single piece of paper except that which you print off on your computer.

Reply:

Yes, he does. On the back of the strategy which we are now evolving, officers and I visited Harrow Council which is held up as leading the way on this. We concluded from that visit that we have a long way to go. There are all sorts of areas and possibilities opening up and we are a little behind the curve on this. We very often assume that we have large numbers of residents who do not access the internet when in fact they do. Whilst we always have to allow for some not being there our main thrust will be to give access by digital means. That is what people want, what they do with banking and that is what we have to do to reflect their needs.

Additional Supplementary Question from Councillor Tony Owen:

With these portals, to what extent will people have to fill in a tick box form and to what extent will there be flexibility for them to ask for what they really want rather than what the form tells them they must choose between?

Reply:

It is a question without a specific answer. As part of the work on the strategy that is evolving we have seen all sorts of areas where we are asking people to tick boxes, to provide evidence which is unnecessary at places that are unnecessary, asking them to come in to a central place in the middle of the borough to have documents scanned when they could be doing that at their libraries – we saw that in Harrow. Certainly we will be looking at that.

12. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

What is the Council itself doing to ensure that the Docklands Light Railway comes to Bromley?

Reply:

The Council is continuing to discuss related matters at the highest level within the GLA and TfL family, who in turn continue to refine the detailed business case which contemplates several potential routes, costings and funding options.

It clearly remains very important that this work is completed at the earliest possible opportunity, to enable us to position ourselves as possible beneficiaries should HS2 be cancelled, and other major capital engineering projects be sought in its place.

As any further substantive news becomes known, I will of course update all colleagues both within this Chamber, as well through the relevant Committees.

Supplementary Question:

It strikes me as strange that this Council is calling on TfL and others to provide moneys, when we are not prepared to put our own hands in our pockets to support this particular scheme. The Portfolio holder needs to come up with another strategy, a lobbying strategy for other boroughs.

Reply:

Councillor Fookes is keen to spend this borough's money as if it grew on a tree at the bottom of the garden, which of course it clearly doesn't. You may recall a member at Westminster who said that there is no more money, and there isn't. We have to make do as best we can, wherever we can get it from. This borough is not a direct beneficiary of HS1 or Crossrail, it has had very little benefit from the Olympic legacy. I think it is absolutely right, given that none of those boroughs put their hands in their pockets, that we receive the same treatment to enable our residents to get to the City of London, Docklands and the East.

Additional Supplementary Question from Councillor Tom Papworth:

The Portfolio Holder has told us that he is constantly campaigning for the Borough's priority of bringing the DLR to Bromley, but without prejudice to that priority which we know can he please confirm that he does fight the good fight to bring the Tramlink to Crystal Palace or if it has slipped his mind can he commit that he will do so going forward.

Reply:

I am delighted to. There is a very good case for Crystal Palace as well as the DLR. This Council sees the strategic importance of DLR, but I give you my absolute word of assurance and promise that the Tramlink to Crystal Palace remains the Council's second, but close second, choice. I will continue to press that case.